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ABSTRACT

Improvisational gaming is a technique involving the use of theater and drama in the teaching of other subjects. The student uses intuition, sense-memory, and imagination in a holistic approach to learning which teaches social skills while it teaches subject matter. Everyone can act and improvise; getting everyone involved is seldom a problem as long as the atmosphere is comfortable and nonthreatening. Objective and nonjudgmental feedback is important to the process. The best time for feedback is immediately after the game. Most theater games can include a whole class, although there may be occasions when it is necessary to divide the class into smaller groups. Props and costumes are not necessary, but they can add fun and can stimulate involvement. The final section of this document describes two sample improvisational games, "Ways of Getting There" and "Play Ball," and provides a source for additional games. (DC)

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LEARNING THROUGH IMPROVISATIONAL GAMES

by Scottie Putman

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LEARNING THROUGH IMPROVISATIONAL GAMES

We learn through experience and experiencing . . . . Experiencing is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it . . . on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive, states Viola Spolin. One method for setting an atmosphere conducive to learning and for providing a space for experiencing, developing, and growing is to include the use of the elements of theater and drama in the teaching of other subjects.

Spolin defines improvisation as "Playing the game; setting out to solve a problem; permitting everything in the environment to work for you in solving the problem; a predominant function of the intuitive . . . ." A game is "a way of looking at something, anything." Reduced to its formal essence, Abt defines a game as "an activity among two or more independent decision-makers seeking to achieve their objectives in some limiting context: Of course, most real-life activities (also) involve independent decision-makers seeking to achieve objectives in some limiting context." Indeed, the use of the word "game" as a metaphor for many social, economic, political, and military activities shows how much we assume about the formal similarity between games and real-life activities: e.g., the "game of life," "game of love," game of war," and "it's all in how you play the game."

Participation in theater games causes the student to use his intuition, sense-memory, and creative imagination in a holistic approach to learning. The student brings to the situation the whole of her life experience. She will be allowed to react out of her mind and body. Creating an illusion takes careful observation and body memory--the body and imagination are the tools.

For many of our students, lack of social skills is a problem that prevents them from functioning effectively in the workplace and in other daily situations. Theater games teach social skills while they teach subject matter. The role-playing that students experience in improvisations and games that simulate life is excellent practice for the real roles they now play or will assume later on.

Some Tips and Techniques for Using Theater Games in the Classroom

Everyone can act; everyone can improvise. We all do it everyday. In this sense, talent has little to do with one's ability to act or play in an improvisation. Spolin says that *it is highly possible that what is called talented behavior is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing. Increasing the individual's capacity for experiencing can evoke that person's untapped potential.* Don't worry about whether the class has a talent for the dramatic. Create an environment in which experimentation can take place; encourage awareness; encourage trying; and watch the process unfold!

Getting everyone involved is seldom a problem. If your atmosphere is comfortable and accepting, there will be no threat, no reason not to play. Getting the class to come to an agreement that everyone will try everything at least once helps not only to encourage participation, but also assures that no one gets laughed at or picked on, because everyone is in the same boat. Let students know that it is all right to feel

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silly at first, that it is natural and that it passes with experience. Some students who are not comfortable with acting out may remain reluctant to participate. Encourage them to become involved in some other aspect of the process. They may enjoy inventing a new game, writing a script, providing background rhythm or music, or even directing a project. What is important is that they feel they have something to contribute.

Feedback and evaluation are as important to the dramatic process as they are to the learning process. The best time for feedback is immediately after the game or improvisation. This is the time to establish objective and non-judgmental words and attitudes. Evaluate the experience in terms of whether or not the player solved the problem, and whether she communicated what she intended. Questions you might ask are "Were the facts accurate? Did they solve the problem? Why or why not? Did they communicate the message?" Also include the players by asking, "How did you feel about it? What things would you change? Any suggestions for next time?"

Most theater games can include a whole class, but occasionally you may need to divide the class into smaller groups, or have a portion of the students be an audience. If your classroom is too small, try moving outside or into an auditorium, cafeteria, or the gymnasium.

Props and costumes are not necessary for theater games, but they add fun as students become more involved. Keep a prop box and a hat rack within easy reach. The prop box might include a cane, a rope, a cup, an apron, a telephone, etc. Accumulate small items as you can, and keep adding to it. The same goes for the hat rack. Hats are a great help in forming a character as long as students do not substitute the prop for true involvement.

SAMPLE GAMES

Ways of Getting There is a beginning exercise game that is good for warm-ups. Students line up on one side of the room. The first time through, each person just walks naturally, one at a time, to a certain predetermined point on the other side of the room. Second and third times through, each person must get to the point by adapting a unique variation, such as described here:

1. Each person must cross as a character from a given historical period.
2. Each person must cross in such a way as to depict how people from a certain country might move, like riding different animals, or using rickshaws, or bicycles, or depicting restrictions in movement due to clothing styles, or crossing different geographical terrains.
3. Each person must cross in a predetermined mathematical or geometrical relationship to the preceding person.

Play Ball Students stand or sit in a circle. The instructor throws a tennis ball to different individuals selected at random. Each person who receives the ball must:

Variation 1: Invent a line to a story--which evolves with each person contributing.

Variation 2: Add a different fact about a subject selected by the instructor (e.g., "cultural differences among Eskimo and Navajo Indians").

Variation 3: Develop the subsequent step in a computer program to list customer names by billing categories.

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For further information and additional game ideas, see Viola Spolin, Improvisation For the Theater, Northwestern University Press, 1963.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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